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ABSTRACT

Because newspapers have begun switching from evening to morning publication with increasing frequency, a study investigated subscriber response to change in publication time and in subscriber behavior over time. In follow-up to an earlier study on subscriber reactions to the conversion to morning publication of the weekday Eugene (Oregon) "Register-Guard," 175 adults were interviewed a year after the changeover. Results indicated that a pattern of increased reading during the morning continued to grow, although total reading time decreased. At the same time, readers watched less television news, perhaps because afternoon newspapers put readers into a "news mood" that conditions them also to turn on television news in the early evenings. Time spent listening to radio also dropped, possibly because morning newspapers answered questions about the weather and sports that must be gleaned from radio otherwise. Subscribers said they were more likely than before the changeover to reread an issue, while attitudes toward morning versus evening publication and freshness of local and nonlocal news were split. Ratings of the newspaper and of network TV news did not change significantly either. Not quite half of the respondents could think of benefits that the morning paper had brought them and they were split again on whether it was easier to take advantage of advertisements in the afternoon. Blue collar workers were less accepting of the morning paper than were other people. (SKC)

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Subscriber Behavior and Attitudes One Year After PM-AM Conversion

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Subscriber Behavior and Attitudes
One Year After PM-AM Conversion

What changes, if any, in subscriber attitudes and behavior take place when a newspaper switches from evening to morning publication? The question is timely because conversion to morning publication has been occurring with increasing frequency recently. (1) Reasons usually given for this pattern include the following: (2)

a) It's easier to make home delivery of a morning paper; b) A morning paper can publish more timely news; c) Evening newspaper reading competes with prime-time television viewing; and, d) Evening newspapers are best-suited to blue-collar workers, and the blue-collar segment of the workforce is decreasing.

Although the trend to morning publication is well-documented, the literature concerning the response of subscribers to such changes is limited. Within that literature, considerably more attention has been given to attitudes toward the media than to media behavior. (3)

Most published research has assessed audience views at one point in time, either prior to a planned change or after a change. Consequently, the literature offers sparse information as to what happens to audience attitudes and behavior as a result of a change in publication time. The authors of this paper found only one before-vs.-after study of reader response to newspaper conversion from evening to morning publication. (4) Furthermore, some of the research that has been done is proprietary and, consequently, has not been published. A useful report based on proprietary research in 36 U.S. markets compares the demographics of morning and evening newspaper readers but does not examine changes of attitudes or behavior as a result of changes in publication time. (5)

The purpose of the research reported in this paper is to add to the knowledge of subscriber response to a change in publication time, including attitudes and behavior over an extended period.

In the Newspaper Research Journal of Winter, 1986, the authors of this paper reported on the first phase of this study. (6) That article examined subscriber behavior and attitudes in response to conversion of the weekday issues of the Eugene (Oregon) Register-Guard from evening to morning publication. The panel study consisted of telephone interviews with 256 adults in randomly selected subscriber households in Eugene and the adjoining city of Springfield. Panel members were interviewed a week before the change and again three to four weeks after the change. This paper reports on the final stage of the study.

Approximately one year after the second interview, panel members were telephoned for the third time. As expected, there was attrition in the panel, but 175 people were interviewed. Five other people said they had cancelled their subscriptions

during the year, but only two of these said it was because of the change to morning publication. One person refused to be interviewed for a third time. In all, 71% of the original panel members were accounted for a year later. For the most part, this paper compares the findings for the third interview with those of the second interview in the light of the original comparison between the first and second interviews. However, in one key case a direct comparison will be made between responses given in the first and third interviews.

Because of sample attrition, the findings for the second interview with those 175 people who were interviewed three times are in some cases slightly different from the findings for the second interview with the entire 256 panel members. Fortunately, however, those differences are so small that the 175 third-wave respondents are representative of the original 256.

Furthermore, the demographics of the third-wave respondents and the original panel are very much the same. In the third wave, 55% of the respondents were female, 49% held white-collar jobs, 59% were 21 to 49 years old, and 65% had at least some college education. The respective figures for the original panel were 58%, 46%, 58% and 65%.

Media Behavior Results

For the 256 adults in the original panel, the average amount of time spent reading a weekday issue of the Register-Guard before 9 a.m. increased from one minute before the conversion to 15 minutes a few weeks later. As shown in Table 1, for the 175 adults who were interviewed a year later, the average time spent reading the paper before 9 a.m. increased further to 22 minutes. Furthermore, average time spent reading the paper between 4 and 7 p.m. dropped from 28 minutes to nine minutes in the first period and dropped to six minutes one year later. Those were the only two dayparts for which there was a significant change in reading time during the one-year period. In the first few weeks after the change in time of publication, total time spent reading a weekday issue of the paper dropped from 45 minutes to 39 minutes. A year later, the figure was 37 minutes, but that was not a significant change.

As these figures show, the pattern of increased reading in the morning that developed in the first few weeks after conversion continued through the next year. Total reading time decreased in the first few weeks but did not meaningfully change in the next year.

Reading of the paper when it was published in the evening was almost totally done after 4 p.m. During the first few weeks after the change, a bi-modal pattern of reading developed, with an average of 15 minutes before noon and 17 minutes after 4 p.m. One year later, some of that bi-modal pattern remained, although now more of the reading was done early in the day. The average

reading time before noon was 24 minutes, and after 4 p.m. it was only 12 minutes.

The proportion of the panel watching television news dropped for two dayparts in the first few weeks after the newspaper changed time of publication. There was a decrease from 23% to 17% before 9 a.m. and a decrease from 41% to 33% between 4 and 7 p.m. As shown in Table 2, there was no significant further change one year later in the proportion of people watching TV news for any daypart. The changes that occurred came about in the first few weeks and held through the following year.

The fact that TV news viewing decreased in the morning was not surprising; that time seemed to be given to reading the paper. The fact that it decreased in the late afternoon, however, was surprising because time formerly given to reading the paper seemed to be available for watching TV news.

In the Newspaper Research Journal article in 1986, the authors speculated that, after years of receiving the newspaper in the evening, many subscribers had been conditioned to turn on the televison news in the late afternoon. In other words, a "news mood" was aroused when the subscriber went through a series of acts--picking up the paper, opening it, sitting down to read, etc. While the reader was in this news mood, it was natural to continue to monitor the news by turning on the TV set. But when the newspaper no longer arrived in the evening, the absence of this mood meant less watching of news between 4 and 7 p.m. as reported earlier. Giving added support to this interpretation is the fact that when only those 175 people who were interviewed three times were considered, it was found that the proportion watching TV news between 4 and 7 p.m. declined from 46% prior to the change in publication time to 36% one year later (chi-square =4.38, df=1, $p<.05$).

It can be argued that if reading the paper in the evening creates a news mood, then reading it in the morning should do the same, and watching TV news at that time should increase. That did not happen in this study, and the authors speculated that a news mood is more likely to be created in the evening than in the morning. It may be that most people who read in the morning are concerned with rushing off to work or getting about the day's tasks, while most of those who read in the evening have time to begin relaxing and enjoying leisure pursuits. The behavioral and attitudinal context of reading the paper in the evening may be so different from that of reading in the morning that a news mood is created only in the former case. In an effort to examine that proposition, two questions were added to the third wave of interviews.

First, panel members were asked whether reading the newspaper ever stimulated them to turn on broadcast news, and 42% of them said it did. These 42% were then asked how often this happened with the morning paper compared to the evening paper. Four out of 10 said it happened less often with the morning paper, another

four said it happened with equal frequency and the other two said it happened more often. The finding is consistent with the hypothesis that reading a newspaper is more likely to create a news mood in the evening than in the morning even though that is not the case for all readers.

The average amount of time spent listening to radio between 9 a.m. and noon dropped during the first few weeks after the conversion, from 29 minutes to 18 minutes. During the same weeks, the average time spent watching television (not just TV news) between noon and 4 p.m. increased from 10 minutes to 14 minutes. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, there was no significant change one year later for either radio listening or television viewing. Again, the changes that occurred came about in the first few weeks.

Conventional wisdom in recent years has held that morning newspapers are better able than are evening newspapers to serve reader needs in regard to weather, sports and stock market news. This study, however, gives no support to that belief. The proportion of subscribers who said they read each of those kinds of news did not change significantly across the three times of measurement. Each time, about four out of 10 said they read weather news, about half said they read sports news and about two out of 10 said they at least glanced at stock market tables.

At all three times of measurement, about four out of 10 people said they kept the newspaper around the house for more than 24 hours. And at no time was there a significant change in the proportion of people who subscribed to another newspaper.

A few weeks after the Register-Guard changed to morning publication, subscribers said they were somewhat more likely than before to read a given issue of the paper more than once. A year later, they still said they were more likely to re-read the paper even though, as reported earlier, reading had become somewhat more concentrated in the morning.

Attitudes Toward Media

A few weeks after the change in publication time, 50% of the people said they would prefer that the newspaper return to evening publication, and 35% said they preferred that it continue to publish in the morning. A year later, the respective figures were 46% and 38%, making it appear that morning publication had gained a few more adherents, but the changes were not statistically significant.

Panel members were asked a few weeks after the change how well they liked the morning paper relative to their expectations, and 53% said they liked it better than they thought they would. A year later, respondents were asked whether they liked it "better than at first," and 41% said they did, while 48% said they did not.

Only 40% of the panel members said they had fully adjusted to the morning paper a few weeks after the change. A year later, 56% had done so.

As to the perceived freshness of both local and non-local news, the panel was about equally divided. A few weeks after the change and again a year later, approximately one-third of the people said each type of news was fresher in the morning paper, another third said it was less fresh and the other third had no opinion.

Panel members were asked to rate the quality of the Register-Guard, network television news and local television news on a four-point scale, with "1" being the highest quality. A few weeks after the conversion, the mean ratings for the newspaper and network TV news had not shifted significantly, but the ratings for local TV news had improved. A year later, no further significant changes had taken place, with the mean being 2.22 for the newspaper, 2.02 for local TV news and 1.97 for network TV news. Even though the ratings varied, it should be noted that the pattern was essentially one of stability: the modal rating for each of the three objects at each of the three times of measurement was "2."

In the third interview, two questions were asked for the first time. When asked whether they could think of benefits the morning paper had brought to them, 41% of the panelists could and 55% could not. About four out of 10 people said it was easier to take advantage of ads to use coupons or find bargains when the paper was published in the afternoon, but another four said that was not so. The other two were not sure.

Blue-Collar Hypothesis

Another piece of conventional wisdom in the newspaper business recently has been that blue-collar workers prefer evening papers, while other people prefer morning papers or have no preference. The reasoning is that most blue-collar people have workshifts that begin and end relatively early, so they have little time to read before going to work in the morning but have more time than others to read the paper in late afternoon before prime-time televison gets their attention. On the other hand, it is argued, white-collar people tend to start and end their workday later, so they have a bit more time to read in the morning but less time to read in the late afternoon. Retired people and housewives are said to be able to arrange for reading time in either the morning or evening.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then blue-collar people would be the most reluctant to accept the Register-Guard's change to morning. The evidence in this study a few weeks after the change generally supported the conventional wisdom, and one year later, it still tended to do so.

Soon after the conversion, significantly more of the blue-collar people (72%) than others (48%) wished the paper would return to afternoon status. A year later, the comparable figures were 60% and 44%, respectively. Further, only 20% of the blue-collar people preferred to get the paper in the morning, compared to 40% of everybody else.

Furthermore, only 20% of the blue-collar workers said they could think of benefits resulting from morning publication, while 44% of other people could do so. Correspondingly, only 20% of the blue-collar people said it was harder to take advantage of advertised bargains when the paper was published in the evening, compared to 44% of the others.

A few weeks after the change in publication time, 69% of the blue-collar workers had not completely adjusted to the morning paper, compared to only 52% of the other panel members. One year later, the difference was in the same direction, 40% to 37%, but was not statistically significant. Both groups had become more adjusted to the morning paper.

Summary and Discussion

In the original article concerning this research, the authors wrote that "when the weekday issues of the newspaper were changed from evening to morning publication, adults in subscriber households changed some--but by no means all--of their media attitudes and behavior." That assessment was based on interviews of panel members one week before the change and again a few weeks later. The findings reported in this paper are based on interviews that were conducted a year later. The most striking finding is that most of the change that took place occurred in the first few weeks. In a few cases, the change continued in the same direction in the following year, but in no case was there a reversal of a change.

The observation that changes mostly occurred in the first few weeks is at variance with a finding by Stone. (7) In a study of people who had subscribed to an evening paper that folded, he found that almost a year later more than half of them were reading the morning paper in the afternoon. He concluded that those people were maintaining their old reading habits. The contradiction in findings, however, may be more apparent than real. In this study, many subscribers were still doing a little reading in the afternoon a year later, but the time spent that way had decreased substantially.

The average amount of time spent reading the paper before 9 a.m. increased greatly during the first few weeks and increased somewhat more in the following year. Before the conversion, reading the paper was concentrated mostly in the late afternoon and evening, a few weeks later reading was divided between morning and evening, and a year later the greatest amount of reading was in the morning. This finding is consistent with

Fowler's data. (8) He observed that two years after the conversion to morning publication, more people were reading the paper in the morning and fewer were reading it in the afternoon.

The total amount of time spent reading the paper dropped in the first few weeks and did not change after that. This finding is contrary to Fowler's observation that reading time did not change significantly. (9) The difference in findings may reflect the difference in the size of the newspapers that were studied. Fowler's paper had less than one-third the circulation of the Register-Guard, so it probably contained fewer pages. He found average reading time to be only 28 minutes before the conversion, compared to 45 minutes in this study. Given that Fowler's smaller paper could be read in less time, reason suggests that the amount of time spent reading it would be less sensitive to tighter morning schedules.

During the first few weeks, time spent listening to radio before 9 a.m. decreased and time spent watching television between noon and 4 p.m. went up. There were no changes in the amount of time spent with radio or television in the year that followed.

In neither of the periods were there any changes in the proportion of people who said they read weather, sports or stock market news. The audience for these kinds of news appeared to be stable regardless of the time of day when the newspaper was published.

A few weeks after the conversion, about half the panel members said they would prefer an afternoon paper, and about one-third of them said they preferred the morning paper. A year later, the morning paper appeared to have gained a little bit in popularity, but the change was not statistically significant.

Not quite half of the panel members had fully adjusted to the change in the first few weeks, but a year later somewhat more than half had done so. Perceptions as to the freshness of the news in the paper did not change significantly in either period.

Ratings of the quality of the newspaper and network TV news did not change significantly in either time span, but ratings of local TV news improved during the first few weeks and remained unchanged after that.

A year after conversion of the paper to morning publication, not quite half of the respondents could think of benefits that the morning paper had brought to them, and panel members were evenly divided as to whether it was easier to take advantage of advertised bargains when the paper came out in the afternoon.

Blue-collar workers were less accepting of the morning paper than were other people either a few weeks later or one year after that. There was evidence, however, that the morning paper had gained somewhat in acceptance among blue-collar workers during

the year.

The most surprising finding of this study concerned a change in TV news watching rather than newspaper reading. Without the paper to put them in a news mood, subscribers reduced the amount of time spent watching TV news between 4 and 7 p.m. The reduction took place in the first few weeks and held through the following year. (In the Eugene-Springfield market, local news and network news from ABC, CBS and NBC are both seen in the 4-7 daypart.)

Stone also found a decrease in watching evening TV news after the evening newspaper folded. (10) In addition, he found that two-thirds of his respondents increased their movie attendance, while only one-fourth decreased it. This latter finding suggests an additional possible explanation for the reduction in TV news watching: Without an evening paper to read, many people may instead pursue activities outside the home.

In all, the picture was one of newspaper subscribers accommodating to the change from evening to morning publication by altering a few habits and attitudes. The general acceptance of the morning paper is reflected in circulation figures. When the Register-Guard changed to morning publication, it had about 65,200 daily circulation, an increase of about 600 over the year before. A year after the change, daily circulation had grown to 69,400. (11) The population of the circulation area was not growing during those years. The circulation growth, however, cannot necessarily be attributed entirely to the change to morning publication. The newspaper made some changes in content and design at the same time.

This single study does not demonstrate, of course, that a change from evening to morning publication would be acceptable to subscribers of any newspaper of any size in any part of the country. It does, however, suggest some kinds of subscriber response that might reasonably be anticipated by editors and publishers considering such a change.

NOTES

(1) Anon., "Trend to AM Editions Expected to Continue," Editor & Publisher, (Jan. 15, 1983), p.9.

(2) Anon., "Why Evening Newspapers are Hurting." Media Decisions, May, 1978, pp. 68-69; Ann Magner and Elsa Mohn, "The Changing Fortunes of Morning and Evening Daily Newspapers and the Occupation of the Workforce." Communication Research Center, Syracuse University, Sept. 30, 1981; Anon., "ABC Panel Covers Pros and Cons of P.M. to A.M. Conversion," Observations, Circulation Research Group, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1982.

(3) Beverly Barnum, "P.M. to A.M. Conversion Study," RMH Research, February, 1981, p. 5; Byron T. Scott and Guido H. Stempel III, "Assessing Reader Views on Conversion to Morning Publication," Newspaper Research Journal, 4: 3-8 (Spring 1983).

(4) Gilbert Len Fowler, Jr., "An Examination of Readership Changes: Does Altering Publication Time Affect the Reading Habit?," Newspaper Research Journal, 7:37-44 (Fall 1985).

(5) Elsa Mohn, "Morning and Evening Daily Newspaper Readers," ANPA News Research Report, No. 38, Nov. 19, 1982.

(6) Galen R. Rarick and James B. Lemert, "Subscriber Behavior and Attitudes in Response to PM-AM Conversion," Newspaper Research Journal, 7:11-18 (Winter 1986).

(7) Gerald C. Stone, "No Rest-in-Peace for Readers After PM's Demise," Newspaper Research Journal, 8:13-27 (Fall 1986).

(8) Fowler, p. 40.

(9) Fowler, p. 41.

(10) Stone, p. 23.

(11) Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 1983, 1984, 1985.

TABLE 1__Time Spent Reading the Register-Guard Yesterday, by Dayparts--A Few Weeks After vs. One Year After Change to Morning Publication (n=175)

Daypart	Mean No. Minutes After: Few Weeks	Mean No. Minutes After: One Year	t	p
Before 9 a.m.	16	22	2.64	<.01
9 a.m. to noon	4	2	1.29	ns
noon to 4 p.m.	3	1	1.82	ns
4 to 7 p.m.	10	6	2.97	<.01
After 7 p.m.	7	6	0.75	ns
Entire day	40	37	1.45	ns

TABLE 2--Proportion of Subscribers Watching Television News Yesterday, by Dayparts--A Few Weeks After vs. One Year After Change to Morning Publication

Daypart	% Watching After: Few Weeks	% Watching After: One Year	n	Chi-square	df	p
Before 9 a.m.	19	16	171	0.38	1	ns
9 a.m. to noon	7	9	173	0.50	1	ns
Noon to 4 p.m.	5	6	170	0.06	1	ns
4 to 7 p.m.	34	36	170	0.15	1	ns
After 7 p.m.	28	31	173	0.30	1	ns

TABLE 3--Time Spent Listening to Radio Yesterday, by Dayparts--A Few Weeks After vs. One Year After Change to Morning Publication (n=175)

Daypart	Mean No. Minutes After: Few Weeks	Mean No. Minutes After: One Year	t	p
Before 9 a.m.	27	29	0.55	ns
9 a.m. to noon	17	20	0.74	ns
Noon to 4 p.m.	20	22	0.42	ns
4 to 7 p.m.	13	10	1.22	ns
After 7 p.m.	8	7	1.13	ns
Entire day	80	87	0.81	ns

TABLE 4--Time Spent Watching Television Yesterday, by Dayparts A Few Weeks After vs. One Year After Change to Morning Publication (n=175)

Daypart	Mean No. Minutes After: Few Weeks	Mean No. Minutes After: One Year	t	df	p
Before 9 a.m.	13	10	1.74	1	ns
9 a.m. to noon	11	11	0.02	1	ns
Noon to 4 p.m.	14	13	0.18	1	ns
4 to 7 p.m.	39	33	1.22	1	ns
After 7 p.m.	79	75	0.64	1	ns
Entire Day	156	142	1.70	1	ns